

21st February: A Day of Mourning, Pride & Action

by Barrister Harun ur Rashid

Former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

21st February is a day of national mourning, pride, reflection and action. It is the Language Martyr's Day. It is fifty- seven years ago that among others, Barkat, Rafiq, Jabbar, Shafiur and Salam sacrificed their young precious lives for honour and preservation of mother language, Bangla.

Only in 1954, the United Front government of Abu Hussain Sarker declared public holiday for this day.

21st February is not only the Bangla Language Martyr's Day in Bangladesh, but also is being observed as International Mother Language Day. It was 17th November 1999, the Paris-based United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) adopted 21st February as the International Mother Language Day at the initiative of Bangladesh government and for the first time, at the call of the UNESCO, 21st February, 2000 was observed as the International Mother Language Day.

Originally the idea of International Mother Language Day is believed to have been mooted by a multi-lingual group, 'Mother Language Lovers of the World', based in Canada and its President Rafiqul Islam had reportedly got in touch with the UNESCO. Since the UNESCO is an inter-governmental organization, it advised them to get in touch with a member-country. Thereafter, the government of Bangladesh moved the proposal forward to UNESCO through the Bangladesh Embassy in Paris. Bangladesh can rightly take credit for taking the initiative for the declaration of the UNESCO.

Therefore it is a day of pride for all people of Bangladesh that the supreme sacrifice made on this day in 1952 has eventually led to the recognition of preservation of mother languages worldwide.

This Day has become a milestone in recognition of the right to speak, promote and preserve all mother languages across the world.

What did actually occur on 21st February?

Pakistani rulers wanted impose Urdu on Bangla people, although Bangla-language people constituted 56% per cent of people of united Pakistan. The people of former East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, strongly objected to it in 1948 when Mr. Jinnah, then the Governor General of Pakistan, had announced it in the Curzon Hall among Dhaka university students. There was an automatic "no" response from the students.

Mr. Dhirendranath Dutta, a member of the Constituent Assembly, argued in the Assembly that Bangla language ought to be one of the state languages of Pakistan. But all these demands fell on deaf ears on Pakistani leaders.

The immediate starting point of the tragedy of 21st February is that on 27th January, 1952, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan Khwaja Nazimuddin announced at a public meeting that Urdu alone should be the state language of Pakistan. The students were infuriated on the announcement.

On 21st February, 1952, agitated unarmed students, both male and female, of Dhaka University decided to violate Section 144 (prohibiting an assembly more than five persons) Order in order to proceed to the elected members of the East Pakistan Legislative Assembly (near SM Hall) to present their demand.

On their way at the site of the Medical College students' hostel number 12, at 3-30 PM, the police opened fire on the peaceful procession of students by an order of a Magistrate (a West Pakistani). Jabbar and Rafiq died on the spot, while three others died later in hospital (an impromptu monument had been set up by Medical College Students on the site of the current Shaheed Minar) It is believed that many more were killed including a boy of ten year old but their bodies were taken away by the police and were secretly buried. The rest is history.

Importance of mother languages :

Mother language is what a baby child communicates for the first time with mother and father. It is a language a person never forgets, wherever that person lives. The mother language is a prism that determines the first notions of the world to a baby child. The umbilical cord between mother tongue and thought is inseparable. It is the mother tongue that represents thought, culture and heritage of an individual.

Scottish historian and essayist Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) called the language "the body of thought". This implies that if a mother tongue is crushed, thoughts and ideas will inevitably die.

About 6 912 mother languages are thought to exist today. But social, demographic and political factors are all contributing to their rapid disappearance. Language experts say that half of the number is likely to disappear as smaller ethnic societies are gradually being assimilated into mainstream national and global cultures. For example, the language, Middle Chulym, now spoken by a handful Siberian townfolk (45 in number), has integrated into Russian language and once the last fluent speaker dies, the language will be extinct.

What is lost when a language is lost is another world, according to many language experts Valuable ethnographic and cultural information disappears when a language dies, leaving a gap in understanding of the variable cognitive structures of which human brain is capable.

Studies of different languages have revealed vastly different ways of representing and interpreting the world. For instance, some Native American and Australian Aboriginal languages reveal a completely different understanding of the relationship between nature

and human beings and how it affects their lives.

Language experts believe that as mother languages disappear, a few dominant languages will exist, such as English, French, Spanish and Chinese, for commerce, education, science and culture in the world the disappearance of mother languages will be a severe blow to linguistic diversity, cognitive science and cultural studies.

Bangladesh is a multi-lingual country, although Bangla is overwhelmingly spoken in the country by all. The majority people should ensure that indigenous languages among tribal and adhvashi people in Bangladesh must not disappear. They must be promoted. Lingual variety will enrich our nation.

Importance of Bangla language

Language is an issue on which people of Bangladesh feel deeply and rightly so. It represents the thought, culture and heritage of Bangladesh. Anyone who wishes to gain an insight into the conditions of life in Bangladesh and to peer into social structures cannot do better than to study Bangla language and literature.

Of all the languages in South Asia, Bangla is the first to develop a literature of a very high order and still holds the model for other languages. Bangla language is unique in the sense that it has many varieties of way to describe an object. For example, in English an “eye” has only one expression to describe but in Bengali an “eye” can be described more than one way (*akhi, nayan, chok, padmalochon* etc).

Bangla writers in the past and present have enriched the language by transfusing Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic and English languages in it. Bangla was raised to its highest fame by Rabindranath Thakur (Tagore) when he was awarded in 1913 the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Have the ideals of the Martyrs' Day fulfilled?

During almost 37 years of independence, the question for everyone is whether the authorities and civil society have achieved the real significance of the Day. The test lies whether all people irrespective of age and gender can read and write.

Free adult education is necessary for mature people, free education together with free learning equipment and school dress for poor children is imperative. In recent years drop out from schools of poor students (almost 50%) has become a big problem.

Yearly Book Fair:

Since 1979, the Ekushey February Book Fair at the Bangladesh Academy premises began to honour the occasion. The fair will achieve its purpose if visitors to the bookstalls are able to buy good quality books with affordable prices.

This year (2009) until 16th February, it is reported that 1,489 new books are added to the book fair. Out of these books 339 are related to poetry, 265 novels, 177 short stories, 190 essays, 45 well-researched books and 45 biographies.

On 18th February (2009) the famous singer from Kolkata Manna Dey visited the fair and he was surprised to note the love for Bengali books by the people in the country

It has been argued by many serious writers that some publishers, to make quick profit, urge popular writers to write novels and love stories for the fair. Since the Bangla Academy has nothing to say on the quality of published books at the fair, it has arguably become a purely commercial venture, exploiting young minds and sentiments.

Some argue the very purpose of the month-long Ekushey book fair is defeated by cheap quality of many books as they do not disseminate knowledge.

Another difficulty is that all books are not available from one book stall because each publisher has its own stall (300-400 stalls in the fair) and a buyer has to move around all the book stalls to buy books of his/her choice. The need for cooperation or coordination among publishers is to be addressed for the benefit of book lovers.

Another matter is to be considered by the Academy whether the book fair can be held in various parts of the Dhaka metropolitan city for access to all, especially for elderly who cannot stand for long in the queue to enter into the fair.

Every Bangladeshi has a right to read books in Bangla. But the price of Bangla books has become very expensive because the printing paper and other materials for publishing books are costly. The government may consider in exempting tax and custom duties on printing paper and other materials so as to make books easily available to readers at an affordable price. A knowledge nation does not grow automatically. It needs to be carefully developed and nurtured.

Conclusion:

21st February is more than a language movement for people of Bangladesh. Many historians think 21st February laid the seed of the foundation of a separate state of Bangladesh on the basis of Bengali nationalism that was aptly summed up by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib when he said: "I am Bengali, my nationalism is Bengali."